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Alexithymia increases the discordance between implicit and explicit self-esteem

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ABSTRACT

Recent studies have stressed the importance of affective information in the translation of implicit/associative evaluations into an explicit/propositional format. Accordingly, we predicted that alexithymia (as an inability to process emotions explicitly) increases implicit vs. explicit self-esteem (SE) discordance. Subjects were 310 university students with mean age 20.5. Four multiple regression analyses with interaction were conducted on self-reported measures of SE, using SE-IAT (Self-Esteem Implicit Association Test) and TAS-20 (Toronto Alexithymia Scale) scale and subscales scores as predictors (Alexithymia total score; Difficulty Identifying Feelings – DIF; Difficulty Describing Feelings – DDF and Externally Oriented Thinking – EOT). In the first regression the interaction term was significant and in the expected direction, confirming that the alexithymia total score increases implicit–explicit SE discordance. With the TAS-20 subscales, only DIF and DDF, but not EOT showed the expected impact on implicit–explicit SE consistency. Some implications in a clinical perspective are discussed.

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1. Introduction

In the last decade a number of researchers have begun to use indirect testing procedures to measure relevant psychological constructs like attitudes, stereotypes, self-esteem and personality traits. One of the most popular of these procedures is the Implicit Association Test (IAT), first developed by Greenwald, McGhee, and Schwartz (1998) and successively used in many areas, among them in the empirical assessment of self-esteem and self-concept (Greenwald & Farnham, 2000). The present study was aimed at demonstrating that the relation between implicit and explicit measures of self-esteem is moderated by the ability to elaborate feelings at the explicit level.

Concerning the relation between implicit and explicit measures, recent meta-analyses covering a series of content domains, including self-esteem and self-concept, showed average implicit–explicit correlations of moderate size: .24 (Hofmann, Gawronski, Gschwendner, Le, & Schmitt, 2005), .37 (Nosek, 2005) and .21 (Greenwald, Poehlman, Uhlmann, & Banaji, 2009). These correlations varied considerably among content domains, with aggregate values as large as .54 for *political preference* and as small as .09 and .12 for *close relationships* and *racial prejudice* (Greenwald et al., 2009).

In a paper on the theoretical distinction between implicit and explicit constructs, Nosek and Smyth (2007) used a multitrait–multimethod approach across seven-attitude objects (flower-in-

sect, creation–evolution, democrat–republican, humanities–science, straight–gay, thin–fat and white–black) to demonstrate that implicit and explicit measures refer to distinct, though related, constructs. In particular, they searched for the best fitting solution among three models: a model with two method factors (whether implicit or explicit measures were used), a model with two method factors plus a single attitude factor for each object (that did not distinguish an explicit from an implicit attitude, e.g. a single unitary attitude towards democrat–republican, etc.), and a model with two method factors plus two correlated attitude factors for each object (e.g. an implicit attitude and an explicit attitude towards democrat–republican, etc.). The last solution obtained the best fit. In this model each IAT correlated with the explicit attitude measures toward the same object (and not with explicit measures toward other objects), but both IAT and the explicit measures also retained unique components that were not reducible to shared method variance.

Along similar lines, Greenwald and Nosek (2008) reported the results of a study on over 10,000 subjects showing apparent dissociations in the form of (a) weak correlations between implicit and explicit measures, (b) separation of their means on scales that should have coincided if they assessed the same construct and (c) differing correlations with other criterion variables. From an analysis of the relevant literature they identified three main interpretations of the implicit–explicit relation:

single representation – the two types of measures assess a single attitude, but under the influence of different extra-attitudinal processes (Fazio & Olson, 2003);

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dual representation – the two types of measures assess distinct forms of attitudes (Chaiken & Trope, 1999; Strack & Deutsch, 2004);

person vs. culture – a variant of the dual representation view, in which self-report measures reflect personal attitudes, whereas IAT measures reflect non-attitudinal cultural semantic knowledge (Olson & Fazio, 2004);

and concluded that, although the empirical evidence supported the distinction between implicit and explicit constructs, it could not indicate which model of representation (single or dual) was better. That is, the distinction between implicit and explicit constructs may be interpreted in terms of either one or two representations and the choice between the two alternatives should only be based on parsimony and explanatory power.

As regards dual representation theories, Gawronski and Bodenhausen (2006) proposed the APE model (APE: associative and propositional evaluation), positing that indirectly assessed attitudes reflect associative evaluations toward an attitude-object, whereas self-reported attitudes reflect propositional evaluations. For APE the two kinds of evaluations do not only differ for their conscious/unconscious level, but also for their processing modes. Associative evaluations depend on links between conceptual elements that are activated spontaneously in memory, producing *immediate affective reactions* toward the attitude-object. These conceptual links are formed according to the principles of contiguity and similarity, and no truth values are assigned to them. In contrast, propositional evaluations reflect *evaluative judgements* toward an attitude object, that is judgements that are founded upon logical rules involving the assignment of truth values, that may or may not be based on *immediate affective reactions*. If the affective reaction is consistent with other information that is used for the propositional evaluation, then the explicit attitude usually reflects the evaluative quality of the implicit attitude. However, if the affective reaction is inconsistent with the propositional information activated, this reaction may be rejected as a valid basis for an evaluative judgement.

In line with the APE model, Hofmann, Gschwendner, Nosek and Schmitt (2005) proposed a working model of implicit–explicit consistency that organizes the empirical evidence within five general groups of moderating factors. Of interest here is the moderating role attributed by them to the factors pertaining to awareness. They argued that the translation process from an implicit to an explicit format may depend on the degree to which people are able to form accurate propositional representations of their underlying associative representations. We may become aware of our implicit associative evaluations in two ways: we may be aware of the internal outcomes (i.e., our *gut feelings*) of our implicit associations (e.g. between black men and bad values), or we could generate inferences about our implicit evaluations through the observation of our own behaviour (Bem, 1972). To support the moderating role of the awareness factors, Hofmann, Gschwendner, et al. (2005) reported the results of studies that examined the influence of *private self-consciousness* and *mindfulness* on implicit–explicit consistency. *Private self-consciousness* was defined as the extent to which individuals pay attention to their bodily and emotional experience and *mindfulness* as an enhanced attention to and awareness of current experience or present reality, which may be reflected in more regular or sustained consciousness of ongoing events and experiences. The hypothesis was that high scorers in *private self-consciousness* and in *mindfulness* exhibit stronger implicit–explicit consistency than low scorers. The effect of *private self-consciousness* was found to be significant only in one out of three studies (Gschwendner, Hofmann & Schmitt, 2004; Hofmann, Gschwendner, & Schmitt, 2005), while in the only study devoted to *mindfulness* (Brown & Ryan, 2003) high scorers in this trait showed stronger

concordance between implicit and explicit assessment of affective states than low scorers. More recently, Smith and Nosek (unpublished manuscript), adopted an experimental approach, based on manipulation, rather than a correlational approach and demonstrated that focusing attention on affective information (i.e., feelings and emotions) rather than on cognitions (i.e., thoughts and beliefs) increased the concordance between implicit and explicit attitudes toward cats/dogs and gay/straight people. They concluded that explicit evaluations can be meaningfully parsed into affective and cognitive components, whereas implicit evaluations are related to affect rather than to cognition.

With regard to self-esteem, Jordan, Whitfield and Zeigler-Hill (2007) argued that implicit self-esteem (ISE) is based on intuitive self-views that are connected to *immediate affective reactions* toward the self, whereas explicit self-esteem (ESE) is based on deliberative self-views that are connected to *evaluative judgements*. By manipulating the perceived validity of intuition, they demonstrated that subjects led to consider their intuition as more valid, reported ESE scores that corresponded more closely to ISE. More recently, Grumm, Nestler and Von Collani (2009) tested predictions concerning asymmetrical patterns of implicit and explicit self-esteem change. In particular, they demonstrated that evaluative conditioning influences implicit self-esteem but not explicit self-esteem, that manipulating the salience of the self-knowledge influences explicit but not implicit self-esteem and, finally, that evaluative conditioning can “spill over to the explicit level” when participants are asked to focus on their feelings prior to making their self-report judgements.

Coming to the present study, if we accept that affective awareness has an influence on implicit–explicit consistency, we may predict that an impaired capacity to identify feelings and to express them through verbal language as reflected by individual differences of alexithymia (Sifneos, 1972; Lane & Schwartz, 1987), will tend to produce a lack of concordance between implicit and explicit measures of attitudes and personality related variables including self-esteem. In other terms, our hypothesis is that alexithymic individuals are impaired in the capacity to explicitly elaborate implicit feelings, and hence their explicit self-judgements will be less informed by implicit feelings.

Accordingly, the present study was aimed at demonstrating that alexithymia scores predict the level of discrepancy between ISE and ESE, with low scorers exhibiting greater implicit–explicit consistency than high scorers. This hypothesis was tested within a multiple regression design, examining the effect of the interaction of ISE and alexithymia on ESE. A further aim was to investigate which facets of alexithymia, if any, are particularly involved in this moderating role.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

Three hundred and ten students (73 males, 231 females, 6 did not report their sex) of the Faculty of Psychology of the Sapienza University of Rome took part in the study in exchange for some course credits. The mean age was 20.5 years with most subjects (78.1%) aged between 18 and 20 years. All the participants were briefed on the contents of the study and were later debriefed and thanked on finishing the laboratory session.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Explicit SE

Explicit SE was measured by the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES; Rosenberg, 1965), an inventory consisting of 10 items

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